



What's Creative about Creative Writing? Critical Pedagogy and Transversal Creativity

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In recent decades, creativity has become a highly valued, even commodified concept. It has, like “community,” as Raymond Williams recognized in *Keywords*, taken on an almost universally positive connotation, and numerous discourses have developed to theorize and capitalize on the concept: creativity studies, innovation management, and the creativity-centered economics of figures such as Richard Florida, who posited the notion of a “creative class,” to name only a few (Williams 76).¹ Despite these developments, most invocations of creativity remain frustratingly open-ended or else narrowly applicable. These questions always threaten to upend such conversations: What do we mean when we talk about “creativity”? How many of the meanings, if any, are interchangeable, and to what extent?

Creative writing in particular would seem to depend, as a matter of definition, on a shared understanding of creativity. Nevertheless, although scholars have repeatedly undone the Romantic myth of individual genius, they just as repeatedly have found cause to bemoan the continued prevalence of that view of creativity in creative writing workshops (Haake 47; Mayers 16; Andrews 247). What's more, a broad social recognition of forms of “creativity” in everyday contexts and non-artistic domains may have already rendered the very name of our field, “creative writing,” problematic. It is telling that perhaps the most widely celebrated “creative” in recent memory is Steve Jobs, with Elon Musk closing in. Within the English department too, cultural studies has turned the gaze of literary studies to a gamut of previously excluded texts—if not always also extending the privilege of authorship to the creators of those texts—and college composition and technical writing alike have rightly claimed the laurels of creativity for other, traditionally “uncreative” modes of writing.

¹In a 1994 essay, Linda Sarbo and Joseph Moxley consider the implications of research in creativity studies for creative writing pedagogy. There, Sarbo and Moxley note one “fundamental obstacle” to such research, namely, “creativity’s imprecise and ambiguous definition” (133). Still, Sarbo and Moxley’s engagement with the scholarship of Teresa Amabile, on the sociality of creativity, as well as with Robert Boice’s work on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, reveals just how valuable this type of interdisciplinary borrowing from creativity studies may prove for creative writing studies.

As creative writing studies emerges as a field, scholars should interrogate the meanings and possibilities of creativity in the educational contexts of creative writing. To this end, I propose the concept of *transversal creativity*, which emphasizes agency and self-invention through a realized meshing of discourses and identities, ways of speaking, writing, thinking, and being that *cut across* and *run between* established discourses and subject positions. Conceived in this light, I think, creativity can bring critical pedagogy into the creative writing course. My purpose in this article, then, is not merely to rearticulate the meaning of “creativity” in creative writing studies, but rather to provide an alternative framework for a politically engaged creative writing pedagogy.

To shed more light on the meaning of transversal creativity, I should turn, for a moment, to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s difficult but valuable *A Thousand Plateaus*. In this book, Deleuze and Guattari present metaphors of vegetative growth in order to distinguish between modes of thinking, writing, speaking, acting, and being that, on the one hand, emphasize unity, stability, and order—the progressive vertical movement of a single system, as I will explain—and, on the other hand, emphasize conceptual movements and connections horizontally between systems. This former type Deleuze and Guattari describe as arborescent, rooted, genealogical; the latter, “rhizomatic.” In botany, rhizomes extend outward from nodes, along and underneath the earth’s surface: consider weeds like couch grass. Metaphorically, then, a discipline or tradition, such as linguistics or the idea of “the poetic tradition,” represents a hierarchically structured discourse that has, over time, become arborescent, fixed—and, crucially, relatively easily transmittable through a banking style of education. An arborescent discipline continues to develop, of course—linguistics will “advance”—but in doing so it climbs upward, like a tree, above a network of foundational “roots.” Conversely, rhizomatic thought moves transversally, taking from diverse, even seemingly distant systems of discourse, bringing whatever materials may be ready at hand together into an assemblage. At its best, inventing an assemblage of this kind—a hybrid way of writing and thinking and acting (and consequently *being*, if one’s identity emerges from how one interacts with a given set of circumstances)—allows for avenues of agency and expression that other, established systems of discourse may not.

Granted, it is better not to too strictly set into opposition the arborescent and rhizomatic modes. As Deleuze and Guattari acknowledge, “There are knots of arborescence in rhizomes, and rhizomatic offshoots in roots” (20). Rhizomatic thought, for instance, often moves between knots of arborescence, as in interdisciplinary efforts, while the hierarchy of a discipline faced with internal contradictions may fall into crisis, ushering in efforts toward reterritorialization.² Furthermore, if the transversal movement that has given rise to it ceases, a rhizomatic structure may itself become arborescent. Yet even accounting for these complexities in the interplay between the rhizomatic and arborescent modes, it nonetheless remains that Deleuze and Guattari’s framework enables a divergent, potentially more subversive and powerful understanding of creativity than is typically the case in our present “age of innovation”—transversal creativity.

²See Thomas S. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* for an account of disciplinary crises that employs a different conceptual vocabulary.

Extending these concepts further, to academic contexts, leads to the following claim: that many traditional university courses familiarize students with (that is, attempt to reproduce within the students' minds) the “arborescence” of established disciplines. Creative writing courses, although they may be taught in such a way as to simply transmit genre familiarity and authorized discursive knowledge, are generally ideal spaces for offering other, transversal possibilities, however. The creative writing course, therefore, presents a space for the redefinition of “political writing”—I am thinking specifically of some of the associations of “political poetry.” Rather than the traditional sense of the term, in which the writer is thought to possess some sort of political enlightenment that is transmitted to the reader through the text, the political writing that I am describing is political with respect to the micropolitics of composing. It is political for the writer, not necessarily for the reader; it is political insofar as the act of composing allows the writer to experiment with creative and potentially subversive identities and relationships to discourse.

In discussions of voice, creative writing studies has already recognized the creative writing course as a space in which “home” or otherwise preexisting identities and stances toward discourse, especially if excluded in other contexts, can authoritatively come into being in the academy—and, for sure, the political potency of the expression of a marginalized self or “voice” should not be underestimated. In “The Body of My Work Is Not Just a Metaphor,” for example, Lynn Domina argues that creative writing instructors should “urge their students to write out of their *selves*” and “model tolerance” for the varieties of self-expression that then emerge (34; italics original). Similarly, Katharine Haake writes of the importance of the student’s ability to claim “the privilege of his or her own speech” (14). These and other statements echo the emphasis, in composition, on “students’ right to their own language,” and it may even be that creative writing courses have, on the whole, shown a greater enthusiasm for this right than many classes in college composition.³

At the same time, as Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner have argued, marginalized student writers (so perhaps, by definition, *all* student writers in most academic settings, though to varying degrees) can wield agency by strategically reappropriating dominant discourses, in an act of that which Homi Bhabha terms “fertile mimesis” (Lu and Horner 589). For the intended rhetorical effect to occur, the reader must recognize this mimicry as resistance, not conformity. As Lu and Horner note, a translingual perspective toward language on the part of the reader—a perspective that regards linguistic difference and the negotiation of linguistic difference as central to all language use, not only secondary language contexts—helps to facilitate this more generous form of uptake, as does active rhetorical intervention on the part of the writer—some indication, for instance, of how the writer would like the reader to interpret the apparent “sameness” of the text. While Lu and Horner write primarily to teachers of college composition, their view of the potential agency available through iteration strikes me as being straightforwardly transferable to creative writing pedagogy. Instructors of creative

³The phrase “students’ right to their own language” refers to the title of a statement issued by the National Council of Teachers of English.

writing should regard both “fertile mimesis” and “students’ right to their own language” as strategies to promote in their classrooms.

Nevertheless, a pedagogy of transversal creativity may enable forms of agency not possible through “being oneself when one isn’t allowed to be oneself,” or even through the strategic iterations of fertile mimesis. Consider, for example, this statement from Haake’s *What Our Speech Disrupts*: “Our purpose as creative writing teachers ought to be to construct a nonhierarchical space within which we can expand prior notions of what might count as writing and extend to every student the privilege of his or her own speech” (18–19). Here, Haake rightly gestures toward the importance of the instructor’s role in establishing an inclusive, open-minded classroom environment, one that promotes mutual respect both between teacher and student and among students. Indeed, “mutuality”—the term that David L. Wallace and Helen Rothschild Ewald use to refer classroom relations emphasizing dialogue and discursive reciprocity—is indispensable in encouraging students to experiment, and Patrick Bizzaro views mutuality favorably as an approach to enacting critical pedagogy in the creative writing classroom:

Mutuality is not quite critical pedagogy. But in the past ten years, it has emerged as a way to salvage critical pedagogy, which itself is a long-standing approach to teaching that many still believe holds the promise for achieving social equality in our writing classrooms. (Wallace and Ewald 3–4; Bizzaro 53).

Domina too, like Haake, issues a call for mutuality *avant la lettre*—and I would not doubt that a proper survey would find that such calls represent a recurring theme in scholarship on creative writing pedagogy, even if not usually embedded, as in Bizzaro’s piece, in a discussion of critical pedagogy (Domina 30). These calls, however, almost without exception also include some variation on the following: “extend to every student the privilege of his or her own speech” (Haake 19); “urge . . . students to write out of their *selves*” (Domina 34); “‘value and make use in the classroom of the language and culture children bring from home’ ” (Bizzaro 63; Delpit xxvi). Such comments, while admirable and in many respects important, nonetheless threaten to essentialize the student’s identity, reifying the notion of the authentic voice and self. They thus impinge on the student’s ability to create new, experimental assemblages that diverge from the authorized discourses and subject positions of both “home” and “school”; in short, they limit the possibilities for self-invention and agency afforded by transversal creativity.

Further, in adopting a pedagogy of transversal creativity, a creative writing course would be able to articulate the “creativity” that it celebrates and seeks to promote—and which we explicitly name in the title of our field—in a sense that far exceeds simply the production of texts historically marked as “creative”: poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, etc. In this course, students would, to be sure, write poems and stories and learn about the conventions of these types of discourse; however, these students would regard “poetry,” for instance, not as an “arborescent” structure to whose expectations they must conform and whose features they must accurately replicate in their writing, but rather as a rich body of material, aspects of which should serve as resources to them in their traversing and

inventing—intellectual work that can be gratifying, liberatory, and potentially subversive.

Some have accused institutionalized creative writing of reproducing en masse the styles, preoccupations, and subjectivities of the literary status quo—clone texts and clone writers (Radavich 219–20). The creative writing course—particularly at the undergraduate level, when transversal development stands among the most important of outcomes—need not fall into this trap (which is, in the language of this essay, the trap of arborescence). In *Factories of Knowledge, Industries of Creativity*, Gerald Raunig praises the model of a social movement whose members, when engaging popular media, speak not “for the movement, but from the movement” (70). Those involved in such a movement inhabit a shared political, discursive, sometimes physical space—they may hold common grievances or goals—yet they do not function as instances of a single, uniform subjectivity, such that the speech of one adequately represents the sentiments of all or any of the others. Similarly, a creative writing course may offer a rhetorical ecology that allows for divergent exploration and development. Although the students interact with one another, with a common instructor, with a shared set of texts, in a unified space, they and their writings do not *reproduce* but rather *emerge* from this complex system, in diverse ways. If not, then the creative writing course cannot properly be said to be creative, only reproductive, as the critics allege.

That being said, a pedagogy of transversal creativity, concerned more with benefiting the student than with benefiting any given body of literature, should appreciate the distinction between individual and social creativity. An adopted discursive stance or subject position may be new—and therefore possibly valuable—for the student, even if it is not objectively new, or new in the annals of human history. Neither instructor nor student should discount this “subjective creativity.”⁴

This view of the creative writing course holds particular promise for undergraduate settings. More than twenty-five years ago, Wendy Bishop suggested that the workshop model typical of graduate creative writing programs, focused on revision and largely inattentive to “average or underprepared” students, “transfers poorly” to courses at the undergraduate level, which should emphasize invention and foster students’ ideas of themselves as *writers* (10–14). Certainly many undergraduate students have vastly different desires for what they will take away from their experience in a creative writing course than their counterparts in MFA and Ph.D. programs do; moreover, only a small proportion of these undergraduates will go on to pursue a graduate degree in creative writing. Pedagogical practices should shift in order to accommodate and respond to these desires. But as Bishop and, later, Tim Mayers observe, graduate-level pedagogies still tend to “trickle down” to undergraduate courses (Bishop 10; Mayers 144). A transition from the traditional values and classroom practices of graduate creative writing programs to a pedagogy that celebrates transversal creativity may better serve undergraduate

⁴It may, granted, be possible to argue for a pedagogy of transversal creativity on the basis that it would help to more quickly usher in experimentation in, e.g., American poetry—and so the instructor should reward only objective novelty, putting aside thoughts of students’ agency or self-invention—but the extreme and, frankly, bizarre instrumentalism of that perspective presupposes a view of creative writing pedagogy that I do not share.

students—especially those in their late teens and early twenties, for whom college may represent a highly formative period in their lives.

I offer transversal creativity as a concept for creative writing pedagogy that I hope that others will adopt, adapt, and incorporate creatively and, with some luck, transversally. I do not mean that remark to be entirely tongue in cheek: transversal creativity can also function as a pedagogical value, with an instructor assembling—out of the various resources available to him or her—divergent ways of speaking, writing, thinking, and being with respect to the students, the subject matter, and the course. For this reason, I am reluctant to provide a readymade pedagogy that would overdetermine the ways in which the idea of transversal creativity might be incorporated into classroom practices. Still, I feel that it would be worthwhile to present some pedagogical principles and one or two possibilities for the classroom, which might serve not so much as requirements but as places to begin.

To start, I agree with Domina, Haake, Bizzaro, and others that we should strive toward enacting in our classrooms the ideals of mutuality. We should practice tolerance and openness to dialogue and, in doing so, “model” these qualities for our students, as Domina writes. Tolerance, in this case, implies not only encouraging—asking for—experimentation with transversal discourses and subject positions but also responding to it with generosity and thoughtful consideration when we do, then, in fact receive it from students.

However, my perspective differs from these other scholars’ insofar as, for one, I feel that the space of the classroom should be made into a rhetorical ecology that provides students with the proper resources to engage in the work of transversal creativity. Thus, while we should not feel compelled to assign *A Thousand Plateaus* as required reading or test our students on their ability to define “deterritorialization,” we should help them toward an awareness of the multiplicity of discourses, the unequal statuses accorded to them by different institutions and communities, and, just as importantly, the discursive hybridity of any text—all of which students should probe in their work for the course. Although an emphasis on students’ expression of marginalized “home” voices—their right to their own language—will sometimes prompt discussion about how and why such marginalization occurs and what it entails, without sufficient attention to the discursive hybridity of texts and the constructedness of discourses, this type of discussion may essentialize “home” and other voices and limit students’ flexibility as writers. Consequently, critical reading and analysis—of the sort that deconstructs texts, conventions, and traditions, shows their contingency, and so creates space for productive “play” with language—becomes necessary.

To facilitate not just critical understanding but creative synthesis, we should introduce a range of types of discourse into the rhetorical ecology of the classroom for students to interact with: not only poetry, for example, and certainly not only one particular kind of poetry. And we should encourage students to regard one another and one another’s writings as resources from which to draw, though in doing so we should continue to stress the importance of tolerance and respect so central to mutuality. The more

“kinds” of language brought into the classroom, the greater the possibility for transversal movement (riffing, subverting, mimicking, bastardizing, etc.) between them.

Assigned writing exercises likely should, in most courses, play some role in extrinsically motivating experimentation, especially at the beginning of a term. For example, an instructor might ask students to rewrite a Shakespearean sonnet using only language encountered in advertisements over the course of a day, then extend that draft by another fourteen lines under other, perhaps student-chosen, constraints. Transformation and constraint based exercises of this sort seem to me fruitful in leading students to new places in their writing. Of course, as the semester progresses and students amass a larger store of ideas and materials, the instructor should give students greater freedom to explore as they see fit, in ways that exercises would only hinder.

Finally, against the tendency of a great many creative writing courses, we should refuse to focus exclusively on the written product, or even on the writing process as a means of producing written products, and instead interrogate alongside our students the various subject positions that an individual may take in relation to a text that he or she has written (or “rewritten” hermeneutically through reading or through adapting, revising, borrowing from, parodying, or any other of the linguistic activities as a result of which a text can be said to have exerted influence) or in relation to a discourse that he or she has assembled. Reflective writing may help to advance students in their consideration of these issues.

In an article previously published in this journal, Trent Hergenrader observes that “creative writing” and “workshop” too often remain vague, contested terms. “When we’re making various claims about ‘creative writing,’ are we talking about elite MFA programs in small liberal arts schools, or multigenre general education undergraduate courses at a large public university?” Hergenrader asks. “When we talk about the shortcomings of the ‘workshop model,’ which of the many related classroom approaches are we actually critiquing?” (3). Although in the context of Hergenrader’s article this passage supports his position that creative writing as of yet occupies an uncertain place in the academy, and that one mission of creative writing studies should be to dispel some of the ambiguities, creative writing’s pedagogical indeterminacy also allows for a greater opportunity for re-territorialization. The multiplicity of pedagogical conceptions of the “workshop model” means that we have all the more freedom to explore politically engaged possibilities for our creative writing courses. It likewise allows for a reexamination of these courses’ intended outcomes. Creative writing courses have sought to help students to achieve numerous goals: to socialize into a community of writers, develop a “writerly” subjectivity, however defined; to learn to recognize and replicate the conventions of discourses socially marked as “creative”; to capitalize on the opportunity to express oneself; to produce publishable texts; to develop a stronger appreciation of certain forms of literature. A pedagogy of transversal creativity hopes, alternatively, or in addition to some combination of these outcomes, to enable students to inhabit an environment that allows for experimentation with creative new subject positions and relationships to, across, and between discourses.

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